

ON DRUMS

Choosing Bass and Tom Drums

The beat beat beat
of the tomtom,
dissected.

BOB SAYDLOWSKI

BASS DRUMS and tomtoms are available in different shell materials, each having their own tonal properties. The most common shells are maple or birch wood, which give a rounded, warm sound. Other shells such as fiberglass (from Tempus and Impac), and Acousticon (made by Remo) yield a more brilliant, harder, louder sound. Of course, many imported (read: inexpensive no-name) drums have unknown "conglomerate" wood shells with different acoustic

qualities. Once again, the thinner the shell, the more vibrant it will be tonally, as with snare drums.

Basics

Standard bass drum sizes range from 20-inch to 24-inch diameters with a 14-inch depth. Lately, deeper drums have come into play, having 16-inch depth. These "power" drums give a longer column for air to travel, and thus, are able to be pitched lower. Some rock and rollers use 26-inch bass drums for maximum depth and volume, but there are two drawbacks: Heads are not usually in stock at local music shops, and the pedal beater is not able to strike center because of the increased drum height. I've seen and played "cannon" bass drums which have dimensions like 20 x 20, 20 x 22, etc. Beyond pushing a lot of air and having a certain cosmetic appeal, they seem to be overkill, along with the fact that cases are hard to get, and tuning of both heads gets difficult.

The size of your bass drum should relate your style: A 24-inch drum would be quite over-powering for a Jazz trio gig, and a 20-inch drum just wouldn't cut it in a Heavy Metal band. In the case of double bass players, if you want the same pitch, then the drums should be the same size. For more interesting double drum patterns, different sized drums will give distinct separate pitches.

A few more points: A bass drum fitted with key rods at the bottom of both sides, rather than T-handle tuners, makes pedal mounting and accurate tuning much easier, since there's not a T-handle angled in the way of things. Be sure the spurs are stable, to prevent the drum from skating forward while you're playing. If you're buying used equipment, the shell must be in perfect round, or the drum won't tune up or take heads easily. Usually, ovaling of a bass drum shell is caused by the front head and hoop being

removed, causing the shell to buckle under the weight of the toms and holder.

Tom Foolery

A wide range of tomtom sizes are available, from 6-inch to 18-inch diameters, in varying depths. Standard rack tom diameters are 12-inch and 13-inch, as they've been for years, just like the standard 16-inch floor tom. Of course, deeper shells give a deeper sound, so besides 8 x 12 and 9 x 13 sizes, there are also 10 x 12, 11 x 12, 11 x 13, and 12 x 13 toms. On the smaller side,

diameters, because I don't find the pitch difference between (for example) a 12-inch and 13-inch, or a 13-inch and 14-inch, to be that discernable. Also, for some unexplained reason, even-sized diameters seem to tune better for me.

One major consideration when buying deep rack toms is the holder they'll be mounted on. A bass drum-mounted holder must give enough height for the toms to clear the bass drum shell, but still allow for comfortable playing. One way to solve the problem is to use floor stands,

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companies make 5 x 6, 5 x 8, 8 x 8, 6 x 10, 8 x 10, 9 x 10, and for larger drums, 10 x 14, 12 x 14, 13 x 14, 12 x 15, 13 x 15, 14 x 15, and 14 x 16 — all used as rack toms. Some manufacturers are building square dimensioned toms such as 10 x 10, 12 x 12, 13 x 13 (as with Pearl's CZX series), which take the concept of low pitches to new "depths."

Floor toms can either be fitted with three legs, or stand-mounted. Common sizes are 16 x 16, 16 x 8, and 14 x 14 (in that order). The extended-depth concept really hasn't been applied to these, but some players use 14 x 15 or 14 x 16 as a floor tom.

I've experimented with a power floor tom size and have had great success with a 16 x 14 drum, which was custom-built for me. This size has the volume and tonal depth of a 16 x 16, but has a little more "throatiness," while providing a reasonably tight batter head tension. Many drummers are gravitating towards smaller toms just for that reason. The head doesn't have to be tuned to a floppy, unresponsive mess to get a deep sound.

Personally, I stay away from 13-inch and 15-inch drums and go only with even

or one of the now-popular drum rack systems offered by Pearl, Tama, Yamaha, Collarlock, CB-700, etc.

Mount Up

Some companies are moving to one-piece, double-ended "stretch" lugs on their drums, which again stirs up the old controversy of whether all that hardware attached to a drum shell restricts its vibration and tone. If you're concerned about a natural drum sound, fitting RIMS mounts on your toms will at least isolate the holder from the drum, allowing vibration of the drum shell itself without being damped by the holder. Some players claim that a plastic covering on a drum inhibits its sound, and that a lacquer finish is better. Since other wooden instruments such as violins and acoustic guitars aren't wrapped in colored plastics, it's a valid point.

As with everything else equipment-wise, what you use should be related to the music you're playing, be it Rock, Jazz, Thrash, or weddings, miked or unmiked.

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